

ELAINE CORREIA



THE REBEL
HEALERS

BOOK 1
THE REBEL HEALERS

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Illuminating Inner Wisdom

To those who know they have a purpose but don't know what it is or are afraid to step into it, may this book spark your imagination and ignite your spirit to pursue your purpose fearlessly.

World of Gea



“**B**EWARE THE REBEL HEALER who will shatter outdated traditions.”

From the journals of Maranchanta, Empyrean Spirit Healer

PROLOGUE

Sheldon, Alba

“**O** PEN UP,” A GRUFF voice commands as fists beat on the solid wood door to Cleric Paul’s cottage.

Exchanging glances with me, Cleric Paul places his pen in its holder, puts a strip of faded ribbon on the page in the thick book we had been studying, then opens the door. I hide behind a stack of books.

“Cleric Paul?” The red-uniformed guard makes a checkmark on a list. “You are summoned to a public execution. At mid-day. Be there or you will become one of those to be punished.”

“But—“ The soldiers are already tromping to the next building.

I gape at the frail old cleric, my mind racing. I squeeze out the words, “Do they mean Margot? And Sara and Katarine?”

“He goes too far,” Cleric Paul mutters. He scoops up a fistful of pages identifying relevant paragraphs of the Ecclesiastic Code. “Let’s go.”

We arrive at the Peeress’s centuries-old manor house, along with the rest of our small town. We crowd into the open

space before the stone manor that is typically used for community gatherings and festivities. The charm of the home has dimmed since the Peeress became the first victim of Captain Sengy's hostile takeover of our province, and her attacker and his soldiers have taken up residence.

Soldiers bring the three captives forward. Guards hold the arms of the women. My friends and my daughter's hands are bound behind their backs and their ankles are hobbled so they can only shuffle.

How dare that high-handed mercenary steal our freedom. He has no right to force his will on us. Where is his respect?

Each woman stands with head held high, and a defiant gleam in her eye.

Shorter than Sara and her daughter, Katarine, Margot stands on the far side of them.

My fingers caress my dagger. I long to rush to her, slice her bonds and whisk her away. But the cold eyes and grim mouths of their burly guards look intimidating. I hold back.

Determined to free my daughter and my friends, I edge through the crowd gathered into a half-circle around the captives. My muscles twitch in anticipation and worry gnaws at my belly.

I will not let my daughter and our friends die. But I have no idea how I can stop the arrogant captain from carrying out his threat.

Where's Nana Magog? She can stop this.

I scan the crowd, but she is nowhere in sight.

I bump into Sara's mate. His usually friendly face is pinched, and dark eyebrows form a straight line across his brow. The man grips his dagger and leans forward with his head lowered, like an angry bull ready to charge.

He startles when I touch his hand, and stares at me. "Wait," I say softly. "We will have a chance to free them."

I catch Margot's eye and she shakes her head slightly. Pride washes over me at my daughter's courage to proclaim what the rest of us fear to speak, and mixes with apprehension. I am not certain Cleric Paul's arguments will free Margot, her friend Katarine, and Katarine's mother, Sara.

Heat surges through my body. *These are my friends. They did nothing wrong. They deserve to be free. Sengy needs to learn we don't tolerate bullies.*

My gaze returns to Margot. Ever since a cleric tried to kill her over twenty years ago when she was a toddler, I have fretted about her safety. I still do. But she is her own person, now, and I struggle to accept the risks she takes.

I won't let Margot sacrifice herself to protect me. The urge to run to them, free them, is strong. A friend grabs my hand and shakes her head.

Feet planted firmly, Margot stands, her lithe body balanced and ready. Dirt smudges on her hands and face suggest she was not idle in her captivity. Similar stains are on Katarine's and Sara's fingers.

I scan the crowd. Beyond the women stands the rotund Cleric Wilson, in long black robes and wearing a black felt hat. He hunts Healers. Involuntarily, I draw back. I don't want him to see me. Beside him is an orderly, one of the Natuan mercenaries that accompanied Captain Sengy when he arrived a week ago. The smaller man holds a plate filled with pastries that Cleric Wilson consumes, savoring each bite. When he finishes, the cleric rubs his hands together in delight. He wears a broad smile, and his booming voice echoes in the square.

"These witches will finally get what they deserve. We'll purge this land of these heathen Goddess worshippers."

That overzealous Natuan cleric thinks he can come in and ruin our way of life.

More soldiers enter the plaza and space themselves between the Sheldon townsfolk and the falsely accused women. The sun flashes off the gold buttons on their red uniforms and the hilts of long swords and daggers. They draw their swords and stand at the ready. Even though we outnumber the soldiers ten to one, going up against these muscular, heartless men, trained in the art of war, would be a disaster. That's what got Margot, Sara, and Katarine into this predicament.

Where is Nana Magog? As the region's senior Healer, she wields the power of the Goddess and is supposed to protect us from this sort of persecution and degradation of our peaceful ways. *She has the power to stop this.* I scan the gathering again, but nowhere do I see the white-haired, stooped figure.

The arrogant captain, who now calls himself Lord Sengy, struts from the stone manor. He smooths deerskin gloves over long fingers. Short brown hair curls around his shoulders. He could have been handsome, if not for his sour expression and the coldness in his eyes.

Stopping before the women, he makes a show of inspecting them, lifting their chins to peer into their faces, then steps around them to inspect their bindings. Tall and willowy Sara, her equally tall and big-boned daughter, and slender Margot glare defiantly at him. Surprisingly, they hold their tongues.

Captain Sengy faces the gathering. “This province now belongs to the Ethnarch, head of the Natuan faith. All citizens must abide by the Natuan Code. I was sent here to enforce that code. You *will* comply.”

“Or what?” someone from the crowd calls. “We don’t accept your god. Never will.”

“We were doing just fine before you came,” someone else shouts. “You can take your god out of Alba and back to where you come from.”

Sengy ignores the speakers and waves at the women. “These women are accused and found guilty of rebelling against my authority and viciously attacking and injuring my officers.”

“You mean injuring their pride,” someone heckles, “because women overpowered trained warriors.”

A murmur ripples through the crowd.

“With only a forge poker and tongs,” someone says. The people laugh.

Cleric Paul detaches from the crowd. Holding a sheaf of papers in a bony hand, he waves them at the self-important man. “These women have not committed any crime under the Natuan Ecclesiastical Code or Alban law. You have no legal authority to detain them. Let them go.”

Sengy rounds on the wispy, old cleric. He towers over him and snorts loudly. “I decide who is detained or let go free.” He waves a hand in the direction of the captives. “These women attacked my soldiers while they performed their duties. The women will be punished for their disobedience and disrespect for my authority.”

“Your soldiers were stealing from Sara’s jewelry shop,” I say. “Even by your Natuan Code, which you are sworn to uphold, theft is considered a crime.”

A soldier whispers into Sengy’s ear. The captain rounds on me, pointing. “Arrest her. She is the one who got away.”

Margot struggles with her bindings and her guards, but they continue to hold her firmly.

Soldiers march toward me. Citizens move to block them.

The old cleric draws himself erect. He lifts an arm and points it at Sengy and the soldiers. A force fills him. “By the One God, you have violated your oath and falsely accuse these women.”

“Out of my way, you old windbag. You have no say in the matter,” Sengy shoves the cleric, who totters backward. Someone catches him. I move deeper into the crowd and out of reach of the soldiers.

Smiling at the gathering, he sweeps an arm toward the captured women. “I will make an example of these women. This is my province now. I am your overlord and you will obey me.” He motions to several guards. “Strip them.” From behind his back, he pulls a coiled whip.

A force rises in me. I long to raise my hand and hurl the fire that consumes me at Sengy and his soldiers. The urge rages within me, but friends restrain me. I stop and take some deep breaths, squeezing my eyes shut, and taming my inner fire. *I cannot kill. I will not break my vow as a Healer, again.* I killed once to save Margot from the cleric who kidnapped her. I shake my head. *I will not kill a second time.*

Sara and Margot, both powerful women not afraid to speak their minds, glance at each other and smile slightly. The wind picks up and swirls around them. The soldiers, in the act of reaching for their tunics, hesitate.

Sara starts. “Captain Sengy.”

“It’s *Lord* to you, woman.”

Sara ignores him. “You come to our town, kill our Peeress, move into her manor house, break our laws, disrespect our citizens, then arrest us for defending what you try to steal.”

Margot picked up the protest. “You are no leader, and we will never respect or honor you. You do not belong here. Leave now before you feel the justice of the Goddess.”

Sengy strikes the two women across the face.

The crowd gasps. Never have we witnessed such a desecration of the Goddess in our town.

“Ha,” Sara says. “Only a weak man would strike a woman.”

Margot, who deals with patriarchal merchants on the mainland, says, “You dishonor your own teachings and Natuan traditions by your treatment of us.”

Sengy comes closer. “That’s because you are not women.”

Sara laughs. “Really.” Even restrained as she is, in one smooth movement, she knees one guard in the groin, then shifts her weight and leans against the other guard to swing the toe of her boot into Sengy’s crotch. Sengy roars. Margot shoves her captor into the guard holding Katarine and twists from the grasp of the other. A cry comes from the Sheldon citizens. They push and shove against the guards.

Sara’s pair’ti rushes to her side and hacks at the cords around his mate’s wrist and ankles with his dagger. I dart to Margot, slicing the ropes in a swift move before the guards can regain their balance.

“Mother, give me your dagger. Now go.”

I shove the dagger into her freed hands as three guards converge on us. At the last moment, Margot kicks one and shoves another. I drop to my knees and crawl between a

soldier's legs and, standing abruptly, I knock him off balance and into the other guards, then race back to the safety of the throng.

Guards attack and stab Sara's mate. Screaming in pain, he drops to his knees. Sara freezes, her attention on her beloved companion. She stands protectively over him, takes Margot's and her daughter's hands, and becomes still. Sara, though not a Healer by trade, still has the gift. The Goddess's power swirls around the three women. Everyone pauses.

Sara raises her voice, points at the usurper, and declares, "Captain Sengy. You have brought dishonor on yourself and your soldiers. May you feel the wrath of the Goddess, and may she expel you and your kind from our shores. May your god cast you, now and forever, into an eternal hell." She rounds on Cleric Wilson, Sengy's new cleric-physician, hovering on the fringes, his deep voice hurling accusations at the women. "And you, Cleric Wilson. The Goddess is the mother of your god. Your god is powerless here, as are you. Begone, the lot of you." She sweeps her arm in a circle and a wind pushes the guards back a step.

In the stunned silence comes a steady tap of wood on stone. Nana Magog, stooped and leaning on her cane, passes through the crowd and the soldiers to stand face-to-face with Sengy.

Finally. Why didn't she come earlier? Hope floods through me.

The elder Healer thumps her cane on the flagstones several times, then stares at the soldier for a long while like she often

does to me when I don't get the meaning of a lesson. The younger man squirms. His superior attitude melts a little and his rigid posture slumps a tiny bit.

"You will not have your revolt today."

She's right. He is trying to incite us. Would he really massacre us?

"Captain Sengy, you have overstepped your authority. You wear the mark of death in your aura. If you stay your hand, you will be allowed to live another day." Her gaze continues to bore into him. "Call off your men. Let these women go."

He draws away from her. Cleric Wilson steps forward and points at Nana. "Arrest her. She is a witch."

But no one moves against her. *Thank the Goddess, Nana still commands some respect.* She points at the captured women with her cane. "You are free. Return to your homes and families."

Margot rushes to hug me. "Mother, why did you risk capture? I could handle myself."

I smile and squeeze her. "I'm glad you are safe, for now. Nana clipped Sengy's wings, but he will try again."

"We will oust him from our province," Margot declares. "He will not take our autonomy."

Nana joins us. "It is not safe in Alba for you any longer, Margot. There is a ship waiting for you tonight at Smuggler's Cove. Be on it," Nana Magog commanded.

“Where will she go?” I ask. “Sam will arrive in port tonight.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Margot declares. “I will see these intruders cast from our shores, to never return again.”

I take Margot’s hand. “I agree. All the Natuans must go.”

Nana laughs softly. “Ellara. Margot. I admire your spirit. But in this fight, you cannot go head-to-head with your adversary. This foe has too many heads and when you sever one, another is there to replace it. No, we have to outsmart this enemy.”

Margot and I stare at Nana Magog. “How do we do that?” I ask.

“I have a plan. This plan has as many legs as our foe has heads.”

What does she know that she is not telling?

“Margot, I need you to lead a band of Goddess-born into the Emerald Mountains.”

Margot studies Nana Magog for a long while. At Nana’s urging, she has traveled throughout much of the mainland provinces as an Advocate for Alban craftswomen.

“Why the Emerald Mountains?” She plants her feet and stares defiantly at our mentor. “Mother must come with me. I will not do this task without her. She must leave Sheldon before Cleric Wilson finds a reason to kill her.”

I wish I could challenge Nana as Margot does.

“Ellara remains with me in Alba.”

“Then I’ll stay. I won’t leave Mother alone.”

“She won’t be alone. Be on that ship tonight. You will rendezvous with your father’s ship after he leaves in a day. When you arrive in Langon, travel upriver to the gateway to the Emerald Mountains. I have a task for you.”

Chapter 1

ELARA AND CLERIC WILSON

Sheldon, Alba

TWO RED UNIFORMED GUARDS sit on a low stone wall outside Basilee's cottage. One carves an apple with his dagger and offers a slice to his companion, then munches on his own. They look up as I approach.

"Well, look who we have here," one guard says, rising. "She's the one who got away and was never punished."

I put my head down and walk quickly past them, hoping Sengy and his soldiers will honor Nana Magog's command to leave the Sheldon citizens alone. Opening the door to the workshop part of the cottage, I slip in and make my way toward the sleeping area.

"I command you to leave." Cleric Wilson blocks the doorway to the sleeping room. "Begone, witch." Shoving me with one plump hand, he raises the other to make the sign of the cross to ward off evil.

I stand my ground and peer around him at the woman moaning on the sleeping mat. Basilee, once healthy and vibrant, now barely moves. The midwife sponges Basilee's forehead and shoots angry glances at the cleric. Basilee's condition is dire. Her mate, Patrick, paces back and forth, crossing his

hands over his heart in the customary position to petition the Goddess.

I know how important this baby is to Basilee and Patrick. After years of trying, their first child has been brought to full term. Swallowing several times to suppress my apprehension, I duck under the clergyman's arm and squeeze past his ample waistline, pleased at how he cringes as I pass. I hasten to Basilee. Her pulses are thready, as are her feeble contractions. The midwife, whom I have assisted with many difficult birthings, shakes her head. Placing my hands on my patient's belly, I sense the baby's distress.

"How long?" I ask softly as I pull a dropper bottle of tincture from my medicine kit.

"Since early this morning. The baby is breech, and I cannot tend to her." The midwife casts a scathing look at the black-robed man. Then under her breath, "When he went out to relieve himself, we were able to send word for you."

"You should have fetched me sooner."

Basilee moans weakly as another contraction grips her body. The Natuan cleric, who professes to be the best physician in the land, glares at us. "Stop. You can do nothing. It's too late for her and for the unborn babe. She's in God's hands now."

I part Basilee's lips and drop the herbal formula into her mouth, while the midwife's hands move expertly around her belly. "We need the Goddess's help," she whispers. "Basilee and the child are at death's door."

I look at the stony visage of Cleric Wilson. This is the first time I have come face to face with this new vicar who calls himself God's Physician. If he witnesses a successful birthing after he had proclaimed it hopeless, both the midwife and I would be accused of being witches and arrested. I would likely be murdered like many of my sister Gra'Bandia Healers. I sigh. I have pledged to serve the Goddess and accept the consequences.

The man must have read my thoughts. "Since the new laws have finally outlawed your archaic Goddess tradition, you are forbidden to practice your craft, Healer. You break the law by being here and helping her. I will finally have the evidence I need to have you killed."

I hold back the caustic comments festering within me and redirect my attention to Basilee, but my mind strays to the day Cleric Wilson arrived in Sheldon just over two weeks ago with the arrogant Captain Sengy. I yearn to accuse the cleric of plotting with the unlawfully self-proclaimed ruler of our region to kill the women of Alba. Captain Sengy has forced the physician upon my patients, and many women have died. When I can, I follow behind him and repair the damage his methods cause.

Aware of the anger spears radiating from the cleric, I snort softly, biting back another insult. He thinks having faith that the One God will heal the malady is a sound practice. He proclaims that he is trained in the latest scientific education about the human body, yet, his practices rely very little upon actual herbal, physical, or wound-tending care. *He doesn't*

have a clue about organizing and harmonizing the energies in body systems to bring about life and health.

I drag my attention back to Basilee, forcing my disgust for this man's behavior aside. Taking a deep breath, I exhale slowly before placing a hand on Basilee's and letting the Goddess's life-giving energy flow into her. "Bassie, stay with us."

Basilee opens her eyes and weakly squeezes my hand. "Thank the Goddess you are here, Ellara."

The cleric struts toward me and growls, "Her soul is prepared to enter the grace of the One God. I will not allow her salvation to be contaminated by the demonic work you do."

I raise my hand and, palm outward, push it toward him as if I could expel him from the room through sheer will.

"Leave us. We have work to do." As I move toward him, he backs away, crossing himself. I nod to Patrick to follow the physician and keep him out of the room. Satisfied that the cleric's fear of Gra'Bandia Healers can be used against him, I close the door and wedge a chair against it to guard against the clergyman witnessing what is required.

Once we are alone, I softly sing the calming song my mentor, Nana Magog, taught me, as I lightly stroke Basilee's belly with a special healing stone Nana gave me many years ago. The muscles relax so the midwife can turn the infant. As I sing, I open my heart to the Goddess and call upon Her Gra'ya to give this mother and child the vitality they need to endure the birthing. I feel the revitalizing force of the Goddess's love flow through me, as the midwife manipulates the baby into position.

The contractions strengthen. I prop Basilee up so she can lean against me and push. In my mind's eye, I watch a channel of light open through the birth canal, and soon, the infant passes into the outer world.

The girl-child cries lustily.

Fists beat upon the door. "Open up." the cleric demands.

"Bassie, are you alright?" Patrick calls.

"Patrick, you have a healthy, beautiful girl," the midwife responds.

Patrick's shouts of joy punctuate the clergyman's pounding.

"We'll let you in when we are finished," I say, secretly pleased we defeated the Natuan One God's representative once again. That I circumvent Sengy's commands elates me, yet the consequences of getting caught terrify me.

Ignoring the cacophony outside, I support the mother while she delivers the placenta. The midwife cleans and purifies Basilee and the baby in the traditional way. The Goddess's Loving Radiance continues to flow through me until the mother and newborn feel strong. The midwife puts the infant into Basilee's arms.

Basilee smiles adoringly at her baby, stroking her as the babe suckles noisily. "Just look at her. She's perfect," she croons, humming softly. By the time we collect the bloodied cloths and clean the birthing area, the infant has fallen asleep, content in her mother's embrace.

Before the midwife opens the door to the enraged physician, Basilee catches my arm. “Thank you, Ellara. None can do what you can. You truly are a gifted Healer. You took a great risk by calling in the Gra’ya of the Goddess. I was prepared to die, but I know it would have been hard for Patrick.” She chuckles. “I’m the one that keeps the business and home going.” She squeezes my hand. “I will keep this secret, even if we must endure their exorcism ritual.”

The exorcism ritual to which she referred is part of an order by Captain Sengy demanding that the Natuan physician must tend to the care of the body and spirit of all of Sheldon’s residents. I snort softly. *Sengy thinks he can break our centuries-old traditions so easily.*

Cleric Wilson bursts into the room, muttering to himself. He inspects the recovering mother, who is returning to her feisty self, then turns his accusatory gaze on me.

“What demonic craft is this? She was at death’s door. I anointed her so she and the babe could go to the Natuan afterlife.” He leans closer. “What bargain did you make with the devil so she could live?”

I stare at the man, appalled. “No bargain. You would have let an innocent mother and her unborn child die because of your ignorance and hubris. You are not following the precepts of your religion, Cleric.” We glare at each other. Is he trying to rid our country of the Goddess tradition by letting women die?

“She was beyond saving.”

I press my lips together to hold back the incendiary words threatening to escape. Instead, I say as calmly as I can, “It appears that perhaps the Natuan physicians do not understand women and childbirth as well as they proclaim.”

The self-important man jabs a pudgy finger at me. “You Healers lead your people in barbaric ways. We will rid this island of you heathens just like we did in the Emerald Mountains. Alba will be converted to the Natuan faith and join the rest of the world.”

Moving with speed one would not expect from such a rotund man, the physician grabs my arm. An electric shock courses through my body. I feel his fear and something else with which I am unfamiliar. I wish I had my daughter’s ability to see auras.

“Ellara Ruark, I’m arresting you for the practice of witchcraft. Your trial will be short, and you will be cast from the cliffs.”

“I did nothing illegal. You have no grounds to charge me.”

He drags me from the small cottage and into the custody of Captain Sengy’s Natuan mercenaries. “Not even that scholarly Cleric Paul, a traitor to his holy vows, can free you this time,” he sneers. “Paul’s time is coming; he will not be welcomed into the Natuan heaven because of his associations with you.”

Chapter 2

ROKAN AND SOPHIA

Suzerain's Palace, Tokurat, Desert Lands

S MALL DUST DEVILS STIRRED by the desert breezes are the only signs of life along the darkened streets. Cloth walls securing the closed food and merchandise stalls flap lazily. Laughter comes from a nearby shuttered building. From somewhere in Old Tokurat, low chanting accompanies the melancholy notes of a reeded shawm. Even at this late hour, not all citizens are asleep. This is my time, an hour for clandestine meetings, assassinations, and spying.

“Master Rokan.” The soft call comes from the shadows opposite my small adobe hut. Creeping from the dimness, a palace servant says, “The Suzerain wants to see you immediately.”

He never gives me a moment's peace.

“Go about your duties. I can find my way,” I growl. Through the narrow, sand-covered alleys of Old Tokurat, I stride toward the palace of Tokur's head of state while the servant trails behind. Detecting a change in his footfalls, I spin around and see the man lifting his dagger to strike. With a sweep of my hand, I dissolve the illusion and face a junior sorcerer. “Oh, it's you. Go on. Get out of my sight.” I wave him ahead.

The man scurries past, casting a side-long glance at me before turning a corner. I exhale heavily. Why does Garrick constantly spy on me? And Sid's idiots never learn. I move on, slowing my pace, wary of an attack by my Droc'ri Brothers. Killing me won't get them closer to becoming Grand Master.

I kick at a pebble, sending it bouncing up the street. They think I'm too old for the job. *Old indeed. I've only lived two hundred years. I'm in my prime. Irksome underlings, perpetually making me prove my superiority.*

I skirt wide around the broad lamp-lined entry through which dignitaries pass for an audience with the Suzerain. I choose a narrow, paved path that leads to a quiet side door. A servant pacing the corridor near the entry stops moving and lowers his head when he sees me, his fingers twitching nervously. "Master Rokan, the Suzerain wants to see you immediately."

I don't want to see him now. I just braved the high seas to accomplish his distasteful tasks while he eats grapes and sips rose water in his favorite garden. I dismiss the frightened servant — he has done his job. I'll see Garrick when I am ready.

A soft pop, accompanied by a sour smell, alerts me that my imp has arrived with a message. I pivot to see the misshapen, perpetually scowling two-legged creature materialize and hover by my elbow. Automatically, I wrinkle my nose. He thrusts out a scrawny arm that holds a folded note in his bony hand. It read, "Ellara captured again. Sengy going to kill her."

I groan. Not again. That woman is more trouble than she is worth. That isn't true, of course. I have plans for Ellara. She will free me from my Droc'ri prison and so much more. Sighing, I follow the passageways deep beneath the palace to my office.

The imp follows me to my study and awaits my instructions just inside the door. I sweep my hand across the white marble wall and speak a few words. Images of Alba form. It is as if the whole island is covered in a semi-opaque blanket with only the vaguest of shapes discernible. *I still can't see.*

I sink into my chair, fish out a black stone talisman from a secret pocket in the supports of my desk and summon Skeld. A vaporous creature coalesces before me. It shifts from side to side as if on a ship at sea. Shifting colors form patterns in the milky blob-shaped form. I press my thumb into the groove worn into the center of the stone and picture Ellara in my mind's eye.

Skeld, my most reliable spy, replays Ellara's activities at a troublesome birthing through images in its filmy body. "*Slow down,*" I send telepathically to the creature. "*Did she summon the Goddess?*"

"*Couldn't say, Master,*" I hear in my mind.

"*You were there. What did she do?*"

"*The usual, Master. Gave her a tincture and held her hand.*"

"*You are invisible and can travel instantly anywhere, anytime. You have no excuse for not knowing what she does. Showing me everything that happens is the least you can*

do to serve me. Do I need to send you back to the Tiarna Drocha?"

The shape moves away and becomes less bright.

"Get over here and show me what else she did."

The creature dutifully hovers just before me. Skeld replays the scene at the birthing.

"Where is she now?"

"With guards." He shows me an image of a building adjacent to the Peeress' manor house in Sheldon.

I lean back in my chair, plagued by the same question I have asked for years. *Has she broken the spell I placed on her so long ago? Or has Jaleem Magog removed it?*

An image of Magog flashes across Skeld's milky form. The image is fleeting but it appears she is in a forest.

I smack my hand on the desk. *"That Healer. Always meddling. I'll bring her to heel if it's the last thing I do. I must get Ellara from that island."*

"Take her away."

"I've tried."

It's Jaleem and Ellara's mother. And the Goddess's protection they wove around her. I thump my fist on the desk. *Then she and her ship captain mate protected their ship so I couldn't touch her even when she left the island. She belongs to me. How will I ever get my hands on her?* I point a finger at the creature. *"You're supposed to help me get her."*

“Go get her.”

I stare at Skeld. *“You think I can just go to Alba and take her? I tried, many years ago. Several times. My magic doesn’t work in Alba. My Katz-paw agents have tried to pry her from that island as well. She won’t come willingly. It’s Magog. She won’t let her leave.”*

The creature bobs up and down as waves of brightness sweep across his form. His sulphury smell wafts over me.

“Don’t laugh at me.” Idiot. I wish he could hear conversations. That would make him a much better spy.

“Slave flawed means master flawed.”

“What?”

“Master doesn’t know all because could not create servant correctly. Master not as smart as he thinks.”

I throw the stone onto the table. It bounces to the far corner and rests precariously on the edge.

Skeld has served me faithfully for the last fifteen years. He came when summoned, displayed images of what he witnessed, and went where I sent him. During the last two years, Skeld had started answering me.

It’s Alba. That country turns my magic against me.

How am I ever going to protect Ellara from herself and keep her alive until I can get her off the island, out of that Goddess’s influence, and into my possession? Only I can keep

her safe in this hostile world, and only if she pledges to me. I retrieve the stone.

“Where’s Thaddeus?”

From a bird’s eye view, an image of a small ship halfway down the eastern Alban coast takes form in Skeld’s body. It will take several days for the fast little ship to arrive in Sheldon. From a slender top drawer in my desk, I pull out a couple of slips of paper. I jot a note to the half-man captain of the *Lovely Lady*. “Cargo in Sheldon. Make haste.” On the second sheet of paper, I scratch, “Send captured Healer to Arkheim Aleas for a reward of five hundred gold nobels. She must be alive.” I nod. This is a fortune for even a rich man. Sengy is greedy, just like the rest of the Natuan mercenaries. This will get her out of danger. Once at sea and away from the Goddess’s protection around Alba, I could capture her, take her to my secret fortress in Nesbit, and away from Garrick.

I carefully fold each note and instruct my imp where to deliver them. He pops out of existence. Unlike with other imp couriers, I know the messages will be delivered instantly and to the right people. And, like Skeld, he operates beyond the confines of time or space.

I lean back in my chair and fold my hands behind my head. Why didn’t Ellara go with her children when they escaped the island a week ago? Why didn’t she leave with her mate like she had when she was pregnant with Margot?

She stood with her daughter when Margot accused the mercenary, Captain Sengy, of being an imposter and unworthy of their province. Ellara was not as vocal and outspoken as

her daughter, but she was nonetheless complicit. And, from my informant in Sheldon, I learned that Captain Sengy had turned the town upside down looking for Margot and Ellara after that event.

I shake my head and sigh. Stubborn woman. Surely, Ellara knows how dangerous it is to remain? *This smells of Magog.* What is the old battle axe up to now?

I study the wall before me, not seeing the images there. I have spent the last forty years looking out for Ellara, keeping her safe from any who took an interest in her. She has no idea of the trouble I've gone through to protect her.

My gaze strays to a page of precise lettering in straight lines. I gently tug it from under the book that shifted during my latest outburst. I hold the sheet up and read the words I already know by heart:

“When the Beast of Evil roams the land and the Leonini rise, there comes a fractured Healer who is not a Healer, along with a sea captain and her counterpart, who enter the realm of the Dark Lords and will bring down the Droc’ri Order.”

I couldn't help a chuckle. The very man from whom Ellara fled when she was pregnant with Margot twenty-five years ago has now become her best friend and reports her activities to me.

I met Cleric Paul during the Religious Wars. Like me, he was a scholar and loved a good debate. We became friends and discussed and argued about the prophecy for decades. He did his research, and I did mine. I discussed the prophecy with Anya, my mentor from the Scholars Guild and a veteran

Healer from the Religious Wars. The three of us came up with an interpretation that could be given to our superiors. However, I suspected Anya and Magog withheld a key piece of information, which I have not been able to extract from them.

I left out a key piece of the prophecy, as well. I want Garrick and the Droc'ri Order to fall. It is the simplest and safest way to get rid of Garrick, my nemesis, and for me to be free to choose the life I want.

Each of us has an agenda for wanting or not wanting to fulfill the prophecy. The Healers want revenge for their failure in the Religious Wars. Garrick believes the Healers wish to take down the Droc'ri Order. He wants to protect his position as Grand Master of the Droc'ri and fulfill his own ambitions of eternal global domination.

Unconsciously, my mouth contorts. *I'll never allow Garrick to fulfill his dream.*

Cleric Paul does not want the Beast of Evil roaming the lands. The Book of Tornaad forbade that creature to be conjured. It would turn people against each other, make plants poisonous, and domesticated animals prey on people. The Droc'ri would be consumed along with the rest of the world. Only the Dark Lords would benefit. Anyone can see that that would be disastrous.

I am almost certain that Ellara is the Healer of the prophecy. Most of all, I can't let anyone find out about her, especially Garrick. He would kill her for sure.

Returning to the problem at hand, I pull a thick tome from the bottom shelf of a bookcase. Leafing through pages, I pause to study the text. On a strip of paper, I write, "Page 927, Line 63 — 66, Natuan Ecclesiastic Code." Summoning my imp, I instruct him to deliver the message to Cleric Paul. It is an obscure law that will free Ellara this time.

I replace the heavy book, conceal the page describing the prophecy under a manuscript on my desk, and pick up the stone that I use to communicate with Skeld.

"Get back to your assignments. And pay more attention."

Concealing the stone, I stand. I'd better see what Garrick wants.

The corridors under the palace where my study is, are mostly dark at this time of night, lit by oil lamps set far apart. I climb the stairs and set out for one of Garrick's favorite gardens, where we typically meet. At the intersection that leads to the servants' quarters, I pause. I long to feed on Sophia. Garrick can wait.

I tap on a door. It opens immediately. A lithe, black-haired young woman smiles enthusiastically and pulls me into her small room. Immediately, my angst dissolves.

She has an unusual power.

A recent addition to the palace servants, Sophia is a pleasing combination of loveliness and intelligence. Of all the servants I have used, she serves me best. I reward her dedication generously with custards and other delicacies from the

Suzerain's table and jewelry and trinkets I come across in my travels.

Wordlessly, she leads me to her bed and slides off my shirt. She kneels behind me, pressing strong thumbs into the muscles along my spine. In a flight of imagination, the shadows created by the single lamp on the table by her bed, and her soothing voice, make me think of a siren on a tropical island who steals my soul. I smile. I like it.

As she kneads upwards and out along the tops of my shoulders, she murmurs softly, "Rokan. You smell of the sea. Are you still working on the conquest of Alba?"

I nod. Sophia has relatives in Alba and is particularly interested in the events taking place there. "The Natuan clerics are forcing out the Goddess tradition. My magic broke through the Goddess's shield that protects the Alban merchant fleet from Bruce the Terrible and his pirates."

"And now Bruce the Terrible can attack them? Is that what has made you so tense?"

I sigh. "I spent two miserable days at sea with the man." I snort. "Bruce is an overbearing moron. He has no class and is nothing more than a two-bit pirate. His magic is pitiful. He can barely calm the sea or call the wind. He couldn't break through the magical shields around the Alban ships. I had to do it for him. I should have never awakened his feeble magical abilities."

Sophia shudders. "I'll never forget how that beastly man captured me. I hated serving him on our way to Tokurat, but I saw what happened to the women who refused." She exhales

raggedly and takes a minute to recompose herself. “I am glad you are not like him or the other sorcerers.”

She reaches toward a small bed stand laden with bottles of scented lotions and herbal infusions, a comb, hairpins, and a few pieces of jewelry. She picks up and uncorks a small container, releasing the sweetly pungent aroma of spruce trees mixed with frankincense, lavender, and several herbs. She made the infusions from samples I brought back from her homeland in the north, where evergreens grow. “Here, let me soothe your aches with this unguent. I made it especially for you.”

As she rubs the ointment into my skin, the distress from the days with Bruce the Terrible fades away. “You always succeed where others fail,” she remarks as she works along my arms. “You deserve respect and reward for all the sacrifices you make for your master.”

The atmosphere surrounding us shifts as her heart opens, and a pale mist emanates from her and fills the air. I inhale the ephemeral nectar of her emotions, smiling to myself. My charm is one of my best tools. It is so much easier to feed on a willing partner.

I pull her onto my lap and kiss her. Meeting her gray-eyed gaze, I touch her forehead, drawing the symbol for sleep and adding the dream that would feel so real to her that she would brag to her friends about her incredibly sensual time with me. Sleep also promotes recovery of the energy reserves that I drain.

I have not engaged in physical mating for over one hundred years. I discovered that, while pleasurable, it often took more time and energy than I could spare. Husbanding my strength for magical purposes has become my priority. Harvesting another's vitality, the unseen essence that animates a person and allows them to work, eat, and live, is far more effective and efficient. Along with the ecstatic lift that sexual energy provides, I can sustain my magic and negate the need for sleep. Replenishing my spirit with another's life force is much faster than eating and sleeping, as others must do. I prefer the northern women, especially those raised in the Goddess tradition. Their essence has a sweet taste and unrestrained quality about it. Unlike women of the Desert Lands, in the north, they are free to live and love as they like.

As Sophia drifts into her erotic fantasy, I kiss her again, my magic drawing forth her life force in a gossamer thread. I inhale and savor the substance recharging my body. Knowing Garrick awaits me, I suspect I will be interrupted before I can be satiated. With a swift movement of my fingers, I draw all her vitality and amass it into a pulsing orb before me. Her body goes limp, and she stops breathing. All I have to do is ingest her entire essence, and I will have the energetic sustenance I need for the next several days. But a good servant is hard to come by, and Sophia knows how to please me without expecting anything in return or becoming jealous of my other lovers.

I purse my lips and blow most of her essence back into her body. Immediately, her breath and muscle tone return to normal. *What fragile creatures they are.* It is so easy to steal the life of another without the other even suspecting.

Unlike other sorcerers who feed on human life, Garrick being the most wasteful, I never take so much of my lover's life force as to kill her. Instead, I sip from my victims, and they feed me for months—after which they ultimately die. Garrick goes through a dozen servants a week.

I had barely begun to fill myself, depleted as I was by the intense effort to break through the protective barrier on the Alban frigate, when someone pounds on the door and thrusts it open. Slowly, I turn to face a short, pale-skinned, weasel-faced sorcerer.

The Droc'ri takes in the scene and appears to delight in interrupting my pleasure. "The Grand Master commands you to his presence. Now."

I lie back on the bed and will myself not to kill the man. Unless he is sent on an errand, Sid spends his time hovering around Garrick as if he could claim the position simply by his continual presence. I don't give the distasteful man the satisfaction of a response.

"The Grand Master is furious with you, Rokan," Sid continues. "He may finally eliminate you, and then I can take your position."

I snort as I slowly shrug into my shirt. This Droc'ri has already tried to assassinate me a dozen times. *I should exterminate him and be done with it.* But the curse the Healer, Ellara, placed on me so many years ago drained my magic so thoroughly that if I were to kill someone, I would need to consume the life essence of a dozen servants to replace what was lost. Hunting and killing Healers or carrying out the orders

of the Grand Master to assassinate someone was easy before I encountered Ellara. Now, I avoid killing and delegate that task to my secret army of Brothers. I cannot appear weak to my Brothers. They would delight in my demise.

Leaving the young woman's room, Sid refuses to walk ahead of me. Grunting, I push by him and proceed toward the garden where Garrick typically lounges. The Droc'ri messenger skulks behind.

"He's in his workroom," Sid hisses. He pushes me toward another passageway.

"I can find my way, Sid. Go on." I turn to wave him away.

At that moment, a half-dozen brown-robed sorcerers emerge from side passages and swarm around me. Their curved assassin daggers glint in the torchlight. I curse silently. *Not again. Why didn't I sense them?*

I back to the wall and face Sid's minions.

"You again," I growl. "You haven't learned I'm your superior in every way, yet?" I lift my head, wearing a smug smile, trusting that my relaxed posture will confuse my opponents. I stare each man in the eye, projecting an attitude of invincibility, while my fingers move swiftly at my side, weaving a protection spell around myself.

"You're not as invincible as you think, Rokan," Sid replies, automatically reaching for his dagger with one hand and a metallic talisman with the other. The others shuffle tensely into a semi-circle, trapping me where I stand with my back to the wall. Like a pack of hyenas, they stalk closer.

Sid sniffs. “I can smell your weakness, Rokan. Face it. You’re old and weak. You’ve lost the strength to be the Grand Master’s Henchman. You’ve had that privilege far too long.” Sid pokes my chest and glances at the ring that makes me the second most powerful sorcerer in the world. “Hand over the ring. We’ll make your death quick, even though you don’t deserve it.”

He utters my name as if it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. I feint an attack at the closest sorcerer. The man leaps back, and I laugh. “You are no match for me. Go entertain yourselves elsewhere.”

“Come on, Rokan. We know you hate working for the Grand Master. How about an eternity working for the Dark Lords in the Tiarna Drocha, instead?” another man taunts, moving into the space I vacated. Someone hurls a spear of fire.

I lift my hand, palm outward, effortlessly blocking the puny attack. It dissipates harmlessly around me.

“Is that the best you can do?” I take my time while I absorb each one’s vital force, weakening them and implanting into their minds a reminder of my reputation as an efficient death-dealer. This isn’t their first attempt, and I know what to expect. So do they.

The man who spoke is afraid of me, and I can sense it. So are the others. I absorb their fear, amplify it with my ring, then deliberately hurl it back at them. I grab my blade and leap at the group’s weakest member. The others swarm around me like angry wasps.

Men press me from all sides. Daggers slash at me, some nicking my arms or thighs. I swing the man I attacked around, using him as a shield. Soon, he hangs like a ragdoll in my grasp. His dead weight slows me down. I hurl him at several assailants, knocking them back, and pounce on those remaining with a single-minded focus.

Droc'ri sorcerers are trained in the art of killing, and master assassin status is a prerequisite to initiation as a Droc'ri. Even though I know I am superior in every way, I cannot let my guard down. Shifting my weight forward onto the balls of my feet, I read my nimble-footed opponents' slightest cues and dart forward in attack, parrying their thrusts or leaping out of the way. Several of the men match me movement for movement. I curse. They're getting better.

The less agile Brothers resort to peppering me with black lightning and fireballs, grasping at me with invisible hands, and plying me with a mind-numbing screech.

Using a prized spell I formulated long ago to gather the magic cast against me, I use my foes to strengthen and increase my agility. I smell their fear and send it back to them, amplified.

I dodge a black lightning bolt and hurl my own at the feet of my assailants, anchoring the men's feet to the floor. Unable to move, they send unseen hands to squeeze my throat. Tendrils of invisible energy wrap around my chest, and other strands wind around my legs to hobble me. Instead of entrapping me, the cords dissolve where they touch my body and drain the magic from my opponents so it flows to me, giving me more power.

“You can’t even kill us. I know you are weak, Rokan.” Sid’s weasel face comes close to mine. In his hand is a clear stone with voids filled with primordial water. He slaps it onto my chest.

I can’t breathe. My lungs fill with water. My mind becomes addled with grim memories of my grimalkin cub and my lady love from the Scholars Guild. I want to cry. I want to die.

The sharp prick of a blade against my neck brings me back to Sid, whose face is inches from mine.

“I’ve found your weakness, Rokan.” He draws a thin line from chin to sternum. Blood seeps onto his blade. “It would be so easy to kill you. But I want you to witness your slow and painful death.” He turns to his cohorts, grinning.

In the moment of his distraction, I contract my diaphragm, dispel the water from my lungs, and gulp air. My fingers touch my traveling talisman and imprint the crystal with the image of a location. Silently, I say the words that summon the gateway to the frigid lands in the far north. With a wave of my hand, I cast the sorcerers into that darkness.

Leaning against the wall, I catch my breath. Touching my neck, I inspect my bloodied fingers and blood-soaked rips in my tunic. After ensuring there were no witnesses, I summon the magic to heal my wounds and restore my clothing. If my Brothers knew I had a Healer’s gift, they would kill me for certain. When they returned, Sid and his Brothers would have to seek healing from an Earth Mage at the Assassins Guild.

It would have been better if I had killed them. It may take a while, but those Droc'ri will be back. Again, I curse my invisible link to Ellara, brought on by what I had once taken from her. Because of her, the use of the Dark Lords' magic and killing drain my vitality so thoroughly that I become an easy mark for even the weakest sorcerer.

Steadying myself with a hand to the wall, I walk toward the end of the corridor. *Sid is killing me slowly with these regular attacks. Maybe he is right. I am not strong enough to be Garrick's Henchman.* I scowl at the mosaic floor. *Ellara must give me her power now, before it's too late.*

A palace servant trembles at the end of the hallway. He beckons. "The Suzerain awaits you," he squeaks.

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